

California water woes hit hard in driest year on record

Bernstein, Reuters, 11-27-13

MENLO-PARK-- To nurture his acres of pistachio trees, Tom Coleman has long relied on water from California's mountain-ringed reservoirs, fed by Sierra streams and water pumped from the massive Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

The driest year on record has left the reservoirs so depleted and the delta so fragile that state water officials say they may be able to provide just 5 percent of the water he and others were expecting for next year.

Other sources of water, including resources from a federal project that also pumps from the delta, are also being stretched, prompting cities to dip into reserves and forcing farmers to scramble.

"I don't know how you're going to come up with the balance of your water," Coleman said last week, he agreed to pay \$160,000 for water from other sources—about three times the amount he normally spends.

Other districts that supply Coleman and farmers like him in the state's San Joaquin Valley were told that barring an unexpectedly wet winter, the state would be able to provide 5 percent of the water he had contracted to buy for next year.

The federal project that also controls water in the state has not yet said how much will be available in 2014. Reservoirs are also expected to be low.

"If things improve with this winter's storms," said Mark Cowin, director of the California Department of Water Resources, "but there is no guarantee that 2014 won't be our third consecutive dry year. Today's situation is a stark reminder that California's fickle weather demands that we make year-round conservation a way of life."

The year is shaping up to be the driest on record in California, officials said, and urban areas are also feeling the pinch. The Metropolitan Water District, which serves about half of heavily populated Southern California, is using reserves to meet residents' needs, and plans to do the same next year, said spokesman E. J. O'Connell. "If it's also dry, rationing may be required," he said.

California normally imports water from Northern California, but we also get supplies from the Colorado River, and they both face dry conditions.

Water has long been a contentious issue in California, where it has been diverted from mountain lakes and rivers.

LED ALMONDS

ckburn, who has been growing almonds for more than 40 years in the western part of Fresno County, has seen the results of the past two dry years: small, shriveled fruit and water that costs three or more times the usual price.

is served by a federally administered water project that pumped about 424 billion gallons from the Delta last year, according to government data. The Bureau of Reclamation, which runs the project, has no idea how much customers will get next year, but water brokers are projecting that some will get none, the man said.

rn could use well water instead, but it contains salts and the mineral boron, which harm almond trees. A water allocation next year could put him out of business.

t and developed our farm out here in 1972," he said. "I raised a family of seven children and sent them to college, and most of them went to college and I just turned 80 - so I'm really not looking forward to going back to this point."

ing the water problems are environmental issues in the Delta, where years of pumping have damaged the river and smelt and hampered the ability of salmon to swim upstream to spawn.

ades ago, environmental officials invoked the U.S. Endangered Species Act, insisting that the Delta must have enough water to sustain its ecosystem before any could be pumped out.

t happened, around 1990, farmers began to get less water than they had contracted for each year. Jones, a California Department of Water Resources manager, said:

conflict between farmers and environmentalists grew.

in Joaquin Valley, hand-painted signs take stabs at the Endangered Species Act. "Congress mandates that we have water," reads one. In grape-growing Sonoma County, an environmentalist-planted sign fires back: "The government's hands suck ... water."

Public lobbyist Kathryn Phillips says plenty of California farmland has access to water from the Sierra Nevada mountain range. Large farms, she said, need not be in the state's drier areas.

"I don't think the environment or the ecosystem should suffer because of some business decisions that large agricultural interests have made that don't work in drought years," Phillips said.